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ABSTRACT

Faced with an evening composition class filled with students inhibited by fears of failure and writing anxieties, the teacher redesigned the course to focus on ways to make writing an activity that could be fun. The teacher's plan for getting the students interested in writing consisted of (1) having students analyze essays they agreed were interesting, using articles primarily from "National Geographic," "Field and Stream," and "Science Digest": (2) inviting professional writers to class to talk about how they attempt to interest readers in their writing: (3) making assignments based on students' individual interests: (4) promising to publish each student's best work in a class "yearbook": and (5) seeing to it that there was some newspaper publicity about what the students were doing. The plan was successful in motivating reluctant students and led to a marked improvement in their writing abilities. (RL)

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Motivating Reluctant Students to Write

Most of my 101 English classes have been dominated by students who had some appreciation for the practical uses of being able to write clearly. Most students have made an effort to master the skills as I outlined them, and I ended the semester feeling, if not wildly successful, at least content that I had helped them improve their writing. But last spring I walked into a night class composed mainly of students who were taking English 101 much as I once took cod live oil from my grandmother: it was good for me, I reasoned; nothing that terrible could be forced upon me by so wise a person unless it had redemptive value. Still, grandma had to catch me and stand over me while I took the stuff, and when I perceived that the mood was upon her to reach for the horrible bottle, I made myself hard to find.

Three of the students were juniors, victims of poor counseling (and a fear of my brand of cod live oil) who had successfully hidden from composition class for years of night school. Several were "retreads"--people who had gone into more English 101 classes than any student should have to, with each experience being a defeat, ending in either their dropping out or failing. The rest were sullen; they would slouch into class and sit as far away from me as the room allowed. They gave me fishy looks when I tried to encourage them about writing, and the only measurable response I got was for three of them to withdraw from class when I gave

their first writing assignment. When three more vanished (after the second writing assignment), and the remaining students spent the period with the resignation of convicted criminals, I began to imagine them all having semian ridges over their brows, dragging their knuckles on the floor as they walked into my class.

And, more constructively, I began to realize that it was a fear of failure, an anxiety about writing that caused the fatalities and mortuary-like gloom in the class. One student articulated the fear clearly: "I know this class is good for me," he said, "but it sure is painful. I hate to write." After pondering the make-up of the class for a few days (and after another student withdrew), I scrapped my syllabus and set to work redesigning the course, focusing upon ways to make writing an activity that could be fun, ways to convert grandma's cod liver oil into palatable food.

My plan of attacking the problem of interesting them in writing consisted of the following elements: (1) having them analyze essays they agreed were interesting, (2) inviting professional writers to class to talk about how they attempt to interest readers in their writing, (3) making assignments students would find fun to explore, (4) promising to publish their best work, and (5) seeing to it that there was some newspaper publicity about what they were doing. I think the plan worked; in some ways it worked better than I could have anticipated.

We spent some class time looking at essays in the required reader. But I found the students more willing to participate in the analysis of articles from National Geographic, Field and Stream, and Science Digest. They were quite good at pointing out the elements in the introductions that captured their interest; if their interest flagged after the opening,

they could, with some help and encouragement, understand where the essay failed. And if the essay held their attention all the way to the end, they could, as a group, come up with explanations as to why the writing continued to be interesting. Toward the end of one period of such analysis (night classes run two and a half hours), they were telling me and each other that the two major things that held their interest were subject matter and "the way the writer said things." I was pleased that they were also aware of the introduction-body-closing structure of the essays. I gave two more periods to having them analyze "the way things were said" in essays they agreed were interesting, directing them into commenting upon such stylistic elements as sentence length and complexity, type of vocabulary, organization of paragraphs, and over-all organization.

My next step was to invite two professional writers to class, one a writer for the local paper, and the other a free-lance writer who writes for area and national magazines. Both were delighted to come, and both responded well to my telling them the elements of their writing I wanted them to talk about. Specifically, I asked that they tell what they did to make their writing interesting enough to make people want to read what they had written. The writers came on different nights, and, though their presentations were quite different, both talked about audience assessment, careful selection of subject matter, and writing style. Both said much that the students had discovered for themselves through examining magazine articles; my students were happy with such confirmation of their own insights. I could see their attitude toward my class was considerably better, and at this point I thought them ready to accept a writing assignment with feelings other than resignation and fear.

Before specifying the assignment, I told them that from that point

on, I was going to be evaluating their writing for possible publication in a booklet; I would make enough copies for each student to have several copies, and I would write an introduction to their work. Each student would have at least one essay in the publication. I defined their audience as being the rest of their English class plus anyone they or other members of the class might show the booklet to. They asked some nervous questions: would I do much editing? Would I rewrite before taking their work to press? I would, I told them, edit only in that I would suggest ways of improving their writing; they would have to do all rewriting. At the time, I had no idea the impact my answer had upon them. It was only when I found students revising themes for the second and third times that I fully appreciated the value of the promised publication in motivating them to study their errors andpolish their work.

The first assignment was for them to write an article of from 300 to 700 words on some aspect of an occupation they found unusual and interresting. I suggested several such occupations, taken from the yellow pages of the phone book: a designer of business logos, a writer of radio ads, a crop duster, a flight instructor. No one took my suggestions; instead, they vied with one another to come up with the most unusual and interesting occupations. I got papers on hair weavers, people who rented bees, people whose job it was to "steal" cars for finance companies that were repossessing them, and other such exotic ocupations. Only one student came to me with the complaint that he could find nothing he considered an interesting and unusual occupation; in our conversation, I discovered that he spent his days repairing windmills, something he enjoyed writing about once I convinced him it was indeed unusual.

Their first essay topic took some time. They had to have help learning how to gather information, how to restrict their topics, and how to

organize. But the final results were quite good: every student found the project an interesting challenge, and each one spent much time in revision. For the rest of the term, I worked hard to come up with writing assignments and exercises that they would find interesting. Even short, in-class pieces might end up in the booklet, I told them.

Then, after they had written several themes, I asked one of the student reporters for the campus news service to write a press release about my class's efforts toward writing for publication. I described the project to the reporter, then handed her some of the better themes my students had written. She wrote a small but informative article, complete with quotes from a couple of the more clever themes, and sent it out to area newspapers. The article appeared in the town's biweekly, in the student paper, in the Amarillo Daily News, as well as several weeklies in the region. I brought copies of the news article to class, but that was hardly necessary; most students came to the next meeting with news clippings in hand. The publicity inspired then to work even harder on their writing and revisions.

The booklet I finally published was inexpensive to produce. A departmental secretary typed the copy, and I had the copies made at a fast-print place. The student's final reward, as most of them saw it, was to have several copies of a small anthology containing essays they were proud to have written. As I saw it, their final reward was a vast improvement in their ability to write.

I certainly hope I never again get an entire class of such thoroughly discouraged students. But I cannot really regret the experience since it forced me to learn some ways to motivate the reluctant student, ways I shall continue to experiment with even in classes not dominated by people who consider what I have to offer to be a kind of academic cod liver oil.